

A
S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE,

R.

ON

COMMENCEMENT-SUNDAY,

JULY V, 1767.

BY BEILBY PORTEUS, D D.

Rector of LAMBETH,
Prebendary of PETERBOROUGH, and
Chaplain to his Grace the Lord Archbishop of CANTERBURY.

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M.DCC.LXVII.

[Price One Shilling.]

SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

ON

COMMENCEMENT-SUNDAY,



BY WILLIAM PORTER, D.D.

Master of Law.

Professor of Jurisprudence.

Of the University of Cambridge.

LONDON:

Printed by J. Johnson, near the Museum, St. Paul's Church-yard.
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TITUS ii. 6.

YOUNG MEN LIKEWISE EXHORT TO BE SOBER-MINDED.



HERE is scarce any subject of exhortation so necessary to youth, as that which is here recommended by St. Paul. Alacrity, emulation, benevolence, frankness, generosity, are almost the natural growth of that enchanting age. What it chiefly wants is something to regulate and temper these good qualities; and to do that is the province of *sober-mindedness*. Let not the young man be frightened with the solemnity of the name. It implies nothing unsuitable to his years, or inconsistent with his most valuable enjoyments. It tends to improve his cheerfulness, though it may restrain his extravagances; to give the warmth of his imagination and the vigour of his understanding a right direction; to single out such enterprizes for him as are worthy of his

natural vivacity and ardour; to prevent his talents and industry from becoming mischievous, his pleasures from proving ruinous, and to render his pursuits subservient, not only to present delight, but to substantial and permanent happiness.

It is evident that there is both a moral and an intellectual sobriety; a modest reserve, a rational guard upon ourselves, not only in acting, but in thinking: and the original word *σωφροσύνη*, which we translate, *to be sober-minded*, includes both these kinds of sobriety. Its primary signification is, to be wise, prudent, temperate; and this prudence chiefly consists,

I. IN the government of the passions.

II. IN the government of the understanding.

FIRST then, we are commanded to teach young men the government of their passions.

*To flee youthful lusts**, is an apostolical admonition not very grateful perhaps to youthful ears; but so indispensably requisite both to temporal and eternal happiness, that it must, at all events, and by every possible means, be inculcated and enforced. It comprehends all those irregular

* 2 Tim. ii. 22.

desires,

desires, to the influence of which is owing much the greatest part of the vice and misery that desolate mankind. *From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts which war in your Members* *. From whence (may we add) come frauds, robberies, murders, breaches of trust, violations of the marriage bed, the ruin of unguarded and unsuspecting innocence, the distress and disgrace of worthy families, the corruption and subversion of whole kingdoms? Come they not all from one and the same impure source, from the violence of headstrong and unruly appetites, which, in pursuit of some unlawful object, burst through all restraints of decency, justice, honour, humanity, gratitude; and throw down every barrier, however sacred, that stands betwixt them and the attainment of their end?

THE passions then ~~must~~ be governed, or they will govern us; and, like all other slaves when in possession of power, will become the most savage and merciless of tyrants. But at what time shall we begin to govern them? The very moment, surely, that they begin to raise commotions in the soul: the moment we know, from conscience, from reason, from revelation, that the gratifications they require ought not to be granted. This period may in some be earlier than in others; but it can scarce ever be later in any, than the

* James iv. 1.

usual time of being transplanted to this place. Here then you ought at once to enter on the disposition of your studies and the regulation of your desires. There is no danger of your undertaking so arduous and necessary a task too soon. If you hope to acquire any authority over your passions, you must inure them to early obedience, and bend them to the yoke whilst they are yet pliant and flexible. It will, even then, indeed be a difficult task. But what is there worth having that is to be obtained without difficulties? They are inseparable from a state of probation, and youth is the proper time for subduing them. In other instances, the obstructions you encounter serve only to inflame your ardour, and stimulate your industry; and why then not in this? Be the discouragements what they will, the consequence is not that you ought to desist from the attempt, but that you ought to begin the sooner. For these obstacles, instead of lessening, will grow upon your ~~own~~ hands: every moment you delay, will but rivet your chains the faster, and give habit time to strengthen appetite. Besides, you have here advantages and helps towards this great work, which no other place, no other time, can afford. The retirement you enjoy from the great world, and the admirable order here observed, were purposely meant to assist you in the science of self-government no less than in the acquisition of learning. The exclusion of all the most dangerous allurements to vice, of those amusements which excite the softer passions,

passions, of those cares and contests which provoke the furious ones, the frequent and stated returns of divine worship, the exact distribution of time, the allotment of almost every hour to its proper employment, the necessity of a modest and uniform apparel, of temperate and public meals, of reposing at night under one common roof; all these things are most wisely calculated to keep the attention fixed on innocent and useful objects, to curb the imagination, to restrain extravagant desires, to induce habits of modesty, humility, temperance, frugality, obedience; in one word, *Sober-mindedness*. It may be thought, perhaps, that the regulation of dress, and diet, and amusement, and such-like trifles, are below the notice of a great and learned body. But it is a mistake to think so. Order and regularity in the minutest points, tend to introduce them, nay, are necessary to introduce them, in the greatest; accustom the mind to restraint, and insensibly form it to the practice of vigilance and self-denial.

It is, in short, the excellent discipline established in these societies, which is their greatest glory, and must be their firmest support. It is what most eminently distinguishes the universities of Great Britain from all others in the world, and justly renders them the admiration of every one whom curiosity draws from other climes to visit them. We cannot, therefore, without some hazard, give up the smallest

article of good government : but in those points which relate immediately to morals, the least relaxation must tend to subvert our credit, and even endanger our existence. In a place sacred to virtue and religion, no species of vice, no kind of temptation to vice, can, for one moment, be tolerated or connived at. We shall not be allowed to say in our defence, that we only keep pace with the manners of the age : this will be deemed our reproach rather than our excuse. Witness the objections daily made to the growing charge of academical education ; when it ought at the same time to be considered, that the enormous price of all the necessaries of life must unavoidably affect us, as well as the rest of the kingdom. And when to this we add, that they who come amongst us, frequently bring along with them, both from their own families, and their schools, a habit of delicacy and expensiveness, it will appear that our share of the fault is not near so great, as some are willing to represent it. We see, however, and it imports us to observe, that the world expects from us an uncommon degree of watchfulness over our conduct. It expects that the correction of national abuses should begin here. And the expectation is not unreasonable. Whence should general reformation take its rise, if ever it rise at all, but from the two great sources of Learning and Religion ? We are as lights set on an eminence, shining at present, indeed, *in a dark place*, in the midst of luxury and profusion, but able, perhaps,

perhaps, by degrees, to disperse the gloom of the surrounding prospect. By our example, we may check the excesses of the present age, and may crush future ones in their birth, by infusing into our youth those lessons and those habits of frugality, abstinence, and sober-mindedness, which are essential to the welfare both of the universities and of the state.

II. THE other great branch of sober-mindedness, which we must recommend to young men, is the government of the understanding.

THERE is a great variety of intellectual errors into which, without a proper conduct of the understanding, or, in other words, without a sound and well-cultivated judgment, the young student will be extremely apt to fall. Of these I shall single out only one, against which it seems at present more peculiarly necessary to caution him, and that is an insatiable thirst for novelty. The Athenians, we know, in the decline of their state, *spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.** In this respect, whatever be the case in others, we fall very little short of that elegant but corrupt people; and the greater part of those who write for popular applause, are determined at any rate to gratify this extravagant passion. For this purpose,

* Acts xvii. 21.

they hold it necessary to depart as far as possible from the plain high road of nature, simplicity, and good sense; which being unfortunately pre-occupied by those great masters of composition, the ancients, and such of the moderns as have trod in their steps, leave them no room in that walk for the distinction at which they aim. They strike out therefore into untried and pathless regions, and there strain every nerve, and put in practice every artifice, to catch the attention and excite the wonder of mankind. Hence all those various corruptions in literature, those affectations of singularity and originality, those quaint conceits, abrupt digressions, obscene allusions, wild starts of fancy, and every other obliquity of a distorted wit, which vitiate the taste, corrupt the morals, and pervert the principles of young and injudicious readers. Hence too all those late profound discoveries—that to give youth a virtuous education is to fill them with bigotry and prejudice; that the right way to teach morality is to make vice appear amiable; that true wisdom and philosophy consist in doubting of every thing, in combating all received opinions, and confounding the most obvious dictates of common sense in the inexplicable mazes of metaphysical refinement; that all establishments, civil or religious, are iniquitous and pernicious usurpations on the liberties of mankind; that the only way to be a good Christian, is to disbelieve above one half of the Gospel; that piety and self-government are duties

not

not worth a wise man's notice; that benevolence is the sum of all virtue and all religion, and that one great proof of our benevolence is to set mankind afloat in uncertainty, and make them as uneasy and hopeless as we can.

WHEN these positions are thus collected together, and proposed without sophistry or disguise to a plain understanding, they appear more like the ravings of a distempered brain, than the serious assertions of sober and reasonable men. And yet they are notoriously nothing more than a faithful compendium of what some of the most favourite authors of the age, both foreign and domestic, avowedly recommend to us, as maxims of wisdom and rules of conduct. Were they actually adopted as such by the bulk of the people, it is easy to see what wild work they would make in society. In effect, the recent opportunities we have had in this island, of observing the ridiculous extravagances resulting from those principles, and the infinite absurdities of a practice formed on the too-prevailing system of modern ethics, are abundantly sufficient to convince us of their utter unfitness for the uses and the duties of common life, as well as for the purposes of the life to come. It behoves us, therefore, to guard our young disciples with the utmost care against this visionary fantastic philosophy, which owes its birth to the concurrence of much vanity and little judgment with a warm and ungoverned imagination, and is studious to recom-

mend itself by the united charms of novelty and eloquence. These are indeed to young minds attractions almost irresistible; but yet a right culture of the understanding will be an effectual security against them; and, with some few improvements, there cannot perhaps be a better for that purpose, than the course of study marked out by the wisdom of the university to the youth of this place; and which, to their praise be it spoken, is pursued by them with astonishing application and success.

THAT judicious mixture of polite letters and philosophic sciences, which is the necessary preparative for their first degree, is admirably calculated at once to refine their taste, enlarge their notions, and exalt their minds. By improving, in the first place, the acquaintance they have already made with the precious remains of antiquity, they will insensibly acquire a relish for true simplicity and chastity of composition. They will learn strength and sublimity of conception, accuracy of order, correctness, copiousness and elegance of expression. They will find that the most justly approved writers of our own times have formed themselves on those great models; and (as one, who well understood what originality was, expresses himself) they will perceive that, “ a true genius is not any bold writer, who breaks through
“ the rules of decency to distinguish himself by the singu-
“ larity of his opinions, but one who, on a deserving
“ subject,

“ subject, is able to open new scenes, and discover a vein of
 “ true and noble thinking, which never entered into any
 “ imagination before; every stroke of whose pen is worth
 “ all the paper blotted by hundreds of others in the whole
 “ course of their lives.*

The cultivation of logic, at the same time, and the most useful and practical branches of the mathematics (which are excellent examples of severe reasoning and sagacious investigation) will also be of singular use in preserving our youth from error, in every subsequent part of knowledge. It will teach them to arrange, and methodize, and connect their thoughts; to examine the arguments of others with a nice and critical penetration; to pursue them through a long concatenation of dependant propositions, and discover whether any link in the chain of proofs be wanting; to distinguish sense from sound, ideas from words, hasty and peremptory decisions from just and legitimate conclusions. It will put them upon their guard against bold and novel opinions, especially if addressed to the imagination by strokes of wit, or to the heart by affecting descriptions, rather than to the understanding by sound and conclusive reasoning. By keeping their judgment in constant exercise, it will improve and strengthen that excellent and useful, but too little regarded, faculty. It will instruct them in the several

* Proposal for correcting, improving, and ascertaining the English tongue; in a Letter to Lord Oxford.

degrees of certainty, and the various kinds of proof, of which different subjects are capable; the just grounds of doubt, assent, or disbelief; the true limits and extent of the human understanding; that precise point, in short, at which our curiosity ought to stop, and beyond which, all is uncertainty, conjecture, and darkness.

THE first suitable employment of our minds, thus improved, is to turn their new-acquired sagacity inward upon themselves, and with the help of the best ethical writers, ancient and modern, to make a careful inspection into their own wonderful frame and constitution. Hence we shall perceive more distinctly, the nature and true value of the rational, the moral, the social, the selfish, principles of action within us, and what tenour of life they point out to us as best accommodated to our circumstances, and likely to produce the most happiness. By leading young people early into such enquiries as these, many things may be taught them of unspeakable use to themselves and others, and many admirable rules suggested to them for the regulation of their future conduct.

AFTER this survey of the moral, it is time to contemplate the wonders of the material world. The great volume of nature is therefore now thrown open to the student. He is led by the hand of science through all the useful and sublime

sublime discoveries of the Newtonian philosophy. He is made acquainted with the several properties of matter, in all its various forms and modifications, on this globe of earth; and furnished with principles for increasing and improving the conveniences of common life. He is then transported to distant planets and other worlds. He investigates the laws that govern their revolutions, and the forces that retain them in their orbits. *He considers the sun when it shineth, and the moon walking in brightness,** and all the host of heaven standing in array before him: and sometimes extends his thoughts even beyond these, beyond the reach of sense, to new firmaments and new lights, rising up to his imagination, in endless succession, through the regions of unbounded space. But so far is he from being *secretly enticed,†* as some have formerly been, to convert his admiration of these glorious luminaries, into an impious adoration of them, that they serve only, as they naturally should do, to carry him up to their great Author, even the *Father of lights.‡* He sees the Deity plainly written in these splendid characters, and derives from them the justest and most magnificent conceptions of his nature and attributes. At the same time, however, that he beholds these proofs of infinite wisdom, power, and goodness, in the works of creation and providence, he meets also with such inexpli-

* Job, xxxi. 26.

† Job, xxxi. 27.

‡ James, i. 17.

cable mysteries, at every step he takes, throughout this whole amazing scene, as must incline him to the humblest opinion of his own limited understanding, the most awful veneration of the Sovereign Lord of the universe, and the most implicit resignation of himself, and all his concerns to his Almighty Will.

Metaphysical speculations, to which his next advance will be, transcend in sublimity the most refined theories that relate to the visible world. They will teach him to abstract, and extend, and spiritualize his ideas; and though he may not, perhaps, be able to go very far himself in a train of thought too unsubstantial, frequently, for common intellects to seize, or to keep long distinctly in view; yet, some knowledge of them, will at least secure him from being caught in the nets that others weave out of those thin materials; will qualify him to drag out falsehood and scepticism from the midst of those obscure, and intricate, and crooked mazes, in which they love to wander; to detect the endless errors, into which excessive subtilty and false refinement must necessarily lead us; to perceive that a quick understanding may as easily miss the middle point where truth resides, by going beyond it, as a dull one, by falling short of it; and that there are in Religion, as in all sciences, certain primary and fundamental truths, which are only
obscured

obscured by much reasoning, and which, after wearying ourselves in vain with endless disquisitions, must at last be left to intuitive perception, and the decisions of common sense.

Thus do each of the several branches of knowledge, pursued in this place, contribute something towards the sober-mindedness recommended by St. Paul: and when once, by means of all, or any, of these, this temper is acquired, one would think it should almost necessarily carry us on to the contemplation and belief of those sacred truths, which Christianity teaches concerning the nature and will of Him who made us. If we are frequently at a loss in comprehending and explaining the commonest objects around us; *how shall we find out the Almighty to perfection?* * If the religion of nature itself, the philosophy of nature, the whole face of nature, is full of mysteries, does not this lead us to expect them in a revelation coming from the great AUTHOR OF NATURE? does it not demonstrate the utter futility of all objections to the difficulties that occur in the dispensation of grace? If, in human sciences, we often perceive that abstruse researches serve only to bewilder and confound us, and that, in our most important pursuits after truth, we must generally be satisfied with probable and pre-

* Job, xi. 7.

sumptive proofs, or plain facts, credibly attested to us; should we not likewise in our spiritual concerns, be well content to abide by the same kind of evidence? If, lastly, in judging by reason only, concerning our state and conduct, we are sometimes doubtful what we ought to do, and oftener what we have to hope or fear; is it not extremely natural for us to observe how admirably the precepts and discoveries of holy writ supply these great defects? how much they elucidate and confirm the darker and more dubious intimations of our own minds; what infinite improvements the science of morals has received since the publication of the Gospel; and how absolutely necessary that divine system of doctrines and duties was, for remedying the imperfections of natural religion, strengthening its obligations, enforcing it with proper sanctions, and giving it a vital and effectual influence on the hearts and actions of mankind.

THESE conclusions firmly settled in the understanding, will form an invincible barrier against all the delusions of *science falsely so called**; and they appear so obvious, that it may be thought they cannot fail of being observed and embraced by every honest and considerate mind. But this is a matter of far too great moment to be left to such probability. If therefore there be any defect in the fair plan of education

* 1 Tim. vi. 20.

adopted in this place, it is perhaps this; that revealed religion has not yet a proper rank assigned it here amongst the other initiatory sciences, is not made an indispensable qualification for academical honours and rewards, has not, in short, all that regard paid to it, which its own intrinsic worth, and the peculiar circumstances at present attending it, seem to demand.

It is well known, that an unbounded freedom is now indulged to the publication of the most licentious opinions; and that these are not, as formerly, confined to bulky volumes of infidelity, or to dull and phlegmatic reasoners; but are dispersed throughout the nation in the most commodious and pleasing vehicles, in works of fancy and amusement, which make irreligion easy to the meanest capacities, and on which some of the first wits of the age are not ashamed to waste their time, and prostitute their talents. These are the books most likely to fall into the hands, and to captivate the hearts, of young men of rank and fortune, at that very dangerous period of life, when they first leave their colleges to mingle in the great world; and on these, if they have not here been taught sounder principles and better things, they will most probably form their notions of religion, and regulate their future lives. Add to this, that a very great part of those

who are bred up amongst us to the church, and from whose pious labours we must chiefly hope for a remedy to these evils, are frequently obliged, by the straitness of their circumstances, to enter on the ministerial office the moment they have taken their first degree, and are, many of them, immediately engaged in large and laborious cures. Unless, therefore, they have before this time acquired some tolerable knowledge of their profession, how can they undertake to explain the Gospel to others, and defend it against all opposers? May it not then, for these reasons, seem advisable for us to turn our thoughts a little more towards this great object, than has been hitherto usual, or perhaps, till this time, needful? It is true, indeed, that the sciences here chiefly cultivated, are an admirable foundation for any future superstructure of religion; and that, besides this, in most private colleges, the fundamentals of Revelation itself are, by the excellent tutors with which this place abounds, explained and illustrated in the ablest manner to their respective pupils. But, considering what has been already said, it may appear at least doubtful whether something more than this is not now become necessary; whether it will not be highly suitable to the wisdom, the dignity, the sanctity, of this learned body, to lend the whole weight of their authority to so good a cause; to assist private instructions by public incitements; to give some signal academical

academical encouragement to this branch of knowledge, something that should make the cultivation of it not only highly creditable, but indispensably necessary. And, fortunately for us, the way is easy and open to the execution of any such design. That noble spirit of emulation, which so eminently distinguishes the youth of this place, and pushes them on to the most wonderful attainments in the abstrusest sciences, affords us an opportunity, which no other seminary in the world can furnish, of raising whatever fruit we please from so generous a stock. We have only to make revealed religion an essential part of university learning, and assign to it a proper share of the usual honorary rewards, and it will soon be pursued with the same ardour of mind and vigour of application, as all the other parts of literature. The current of study amongst us, which was formerly thought to run too strongly towards mathematical subjects, has of late years, by means of the excellent institutions in favour of classical learning, been, in part, diverted into another and more useful course. By the method here proposed, (or any other of the same tendency which should be judged more eligible) there would be one more, and that a still nobler, channel opened to it: and some few of those many hours, and those fine talents, which are still, perhaps, too lavishly wasted here sometimes on abstract speculations in the most precious

and

and improvable part of life, would be then more profitably employed in learning the elements of practical wisdom, and rendering the occupations of solitude subservient to the uses of active life, the discharge of social duties, and the promotion of true piety.

THIS university had, in the conclusion of the last century, the honour of giving birth to a stupendous system of philosophy, erected by its great disciple NEWTON, on the immovable basis of experiment and demonstration; which, by degrees, supplanted and overthrew a visionary though ingenious representation of nature, drawn by fancy, and supported by conjecture. Animated with this success, let it now endeavour to push its conquests still further into the regions of ignorance and error, to banish from the kingdom the extravagant conceits of modern scepticism, no less destitute of all foundation in truth, utility, and sound reasoning, than the philosophical romance of Descartes; and to establish for ever in the minds of the British youth, a religion founded not on *the enticing words of man's wisdom*, but on the *demonstration of the spirit and the power of God* *.

This will be to promote, in the most effectual manner, the benevolent purposes of those great benefactors we are

* 1 Cor. ii. 4, 5.

now going to commemorate; whose first object in these magnificent foundations was, undoubtedly, the advancement of religion; who, with a true greatness of soul, carried their views forwards into eternity, and plainly meant, that in these elegant retreats, we should not only lay the foundations of immortal fame on earth, but qualify ourselves for obtaining, through the merits of our Redeemer, a real and truly glorious immortality in heaven.

T H E E N D.

Lately published,
 THE SECOND EDITION
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 BY Dr. PORTEUS.
 Printed for T. PAYNE, at the Mews-Gate.

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THE END

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